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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 001132

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OSD FOR MAGGIE SADOWSKA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [IT](#) [AF](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SECRETARY GATES' OCTOBER 13  
MEETING WITH MOD LA RUSSA

REF: A. ROME 1072  
[1](#)B. ROME 1119  
[1](#)C. ROME 1103

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Elizabeth Dibble for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Your meeting with Italian Minister of Defense Ignazio La Russa in Washington on October 13 comes at a crucial moment, as Italy ponders possible cuts to its overseas deployments budget. La Russa is a good friend of the U.S., a strong advocate for our shared transatlantic security interests, and -- a rarity in Europe -- a strong supporter of NATO's mission in Afghanistan who is not afraid to make the case in public for Italy's continued engagement there. Thanks in large part to his determined public advocacy, ISAF remains a top-tier Italian priority. His primary goal in coming to Washington is to hear from you the U.S. position with regard to the future of the Afghan mission in light of the McChrystal report. Your meeting will give him the guidance and the ammunition to continue to make the case for the mission effectively in Parliament, in the press, and within the government. Shortly after your meeting he will have to forge consensus within the Cabinet for a new decree providing funding for Italy's 9,000-troop overseas security deployment, which includes 3,100 troops in ISAF, 2,300 in UNIFIL, and 1,900 in KFOR. To do this, he will have to fend off the Finance Minister's calls for large defense budget cuts and deal with PM Berlusconi's junior coalition partner, Umberto Bossi, leader of the Northern League, who has voiced skepticism about the Afghan mission in the wake of the September 17 bombing in Kabul that killed six Italian soldiers. La Russa will be seeking reassurance from you that the U.S. has settled on a clear strategy in the wake of the McChrystal assessment, since it will fall to him to make the case for any Italian troop or resource increases that NATO requires. Your meeting also provides an opportunity to prevent a significant Italian drawdown in Lebanon in 2010 as Italy prepares to hand off the command of UNIFIL.

Tough Advocate of Italian Military Missions Overseas  
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[1](#)2. (C/NF) La Russa, unlike many of his cabinet colleagues, has been a vocal advocate for a strong defense and robust

overseas security commitments since the Berlusconi government came to power in May 2008. Although not a member of Berlusconi's inner circle, he is an important politician in his own right -- the second most powerful figure in the right-wing Alleanza Nazionale Party that recently merged with Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (PDL) Party. A lawyer by profession, La Russa is a savvy political strategist whose somewhat rough appearance and manner hides a sharp intellect with a keen grasp of details. Although he is often accused of paying too much attention to party politics and not enough to senior military leadership, La Russa is a strong advocate for increased defense spending, improved protections for Italian troops in the field, and is popular with the troops. He values highly his personal relationship with you and has highlighted his past meetings with you at Defense Ministerials in statements to the press. It is important for him to be able to carry a message back from Washington that he can use to carry the day against the skeptics and budget-cutters in the Cabinet, and he knows that Berlusconi, who values his relationship with President Obama, will be more responsive to direct appeals from Washington.

Afghanistan

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¶3. (C/NF) La Russa is a true believer in NATO and in the Afghan mission who has provided political cover for his commanders to take a much more aggressive operational stance in RC-West than his predecessor under the center-left Prodi government. After the September 17 bombing in Kabul that killed six Italian paratroopers, La Russa appeared immediately in Parliament to condemn the attack and to make clear that Italy's commitment to the mission would not waver. Others in the cabinet -- Berlusconi included -- were less

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resolute, asserting that Italy's 500 temporary Election Security Forces (ESF) would return within weeks and calling for a "transition strategy" (Ref A). Since then most cabinet members have fallen into line with La Russa's position and conceded that the decision on when to bring back ESF units must be made collectively within NATO. La Russa will be looking for a signal from you as to the importance of these troops, as the Cabinet must present Parliament with a decree providing funding for this and other overseas missions by the end of October.

¶4. (S/NF) Italy also contributes a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Herat, 40 Carabinieri police trainers (with another 160 on the way), and a battle group in Kabul. Italy was recently given the Police Training Command in the new NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan (NTM-A), which the GOI values as a strong signal of international acknowledgment of Carabinieri expertise in this area. In 2008 Berlusconi downgraded the Italian caveat restricting out-of-area operations by Italian troops to a "remark" requiring 6 hours to respond to any COMISAF out-of-area deployment request, but this has little real impact on Italy's operational flexibility, since Italy has never been asked to make such a deployment on short notice. Italian officials routinely tell us that access to "four-eyes" intelligence sharing would help them to drop the remaining "remark" from the caveats list.

UNIFIL

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¶5. (C/NF) As reported in Ref B, Italy is waiting for a signal from the U.S. in favor of a short-term roll-over of its command in UNIFIL, a request recently made by the Lebanese government to Italy. Italy has not opposed Spain's bid to take over the command in 2010, but has made it clear that it would lower its troop contribution to a level below Spain's because Italy believes that the command nation should field the largest contingent. Spain has indicated that it will not be able to provide as many troops as Italy did during its command (2,300-2,500) and is hoping that other contributors

will make up the shortfall. The Lebanese government, concerned about the signal a weakened UNIFIL would send as PM-designate Hariri struggles to form a government, approached Italy to ask that it permit a one-year rollover of General Graziano's command. Italian officials tell us a one-year rollover is unrealistic, but that the GOI would likely be responsive to requests from the UN, the U.S. and Israel to stay on for a six-month rollover. La Russa, like many in the Italian center-right, tends to view UNIFIL as a "soft" mission inherited from the center-left Prodi government, but a signal from you that the U.S. does not want to see the mission weakened and would prefer that Italy retain its current troop level -- albeit not at the expense of troop commitments in Afghanistan -- would help him make the case in the cabinet. With sufficient political will and financial resources, Italy can continue to maintain both missions at current strength or better.

Other Missions: KFOR, NTM-I, Anti-Piracy, CoESPU  
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16. (C) Italy is a founding member of NATO and a solid contributor to NATO missions and programs worldwide, but its continued defense budget cuts (it spends only around 1 per cent of GDP on defense) threaten to weaken its role in the Alliance. Italy is traditionally the largest troop contributor in the Balkans and continues to maintain 1,900 troops in KFOR, although the GOI hopes that NATO's planned phased drawdown will free up to 1,000 of those troops for other missions over the next year. Italy is the leading contributor to the NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) with 84 military and police trainers (Carabinieri), who have trained over 4,000 Iraqi National Police (INP) at NTM-I. Italy contributes a frigate each to the NATO and EU anti-piracy missions and is a long-standing contributor to Operation Active Endeavor in the Mediterranean. Italian officials were pleased that President Obama praised CoESPU (Center of Excellence for Stability Police Units), the U.S.-Italian joint police peacekeeping training center in

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Vicenza, during his meeting on the margins of UNGA with the leaders of the top ten peacekeeping contributing countries, including Italy.

U.S. Basing: Cornerstone of U.S.-Italy Security Relationship  
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17. (C) Italy is our single most important ally in Europe for projecting military power into the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East. Five major Italian military base complexes (Naples, Sigonella, Camp Darby, Vicenza and Aviano) host approximately 13,000 U.S. military and DOD civilian personnel, 16,000 family members, and 4,000 Italian employees. Increases or changes in this basing footprint can be controversial with local politicians and we rely on Italian political support at the highest levels, as we did. GOI approval and support for the expansion project at Dal Molin Airfield in Vicenza to accommodate the consolidation of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team is a positive example of this sort of collaboration. We may require La Russa's help in the near future with a range of basing problems including our request for GOI formal recognition of the leased Navy Support Site at Gricignano (Naples) as a military base under the NATO SOFA and Bilateral Infrastructure Agreement, and approval for the construction of the Navy's Mobile User Objective System (MUOS) global satellite communications system at the Navy Radio Transmitter Facility in Niscemi, Sicily. La Russa has, at our request, made helpful public statements on the MUOS issue in the past. A signal from you that we value his support in this regard would help to focus his attention on the often arcane technical and legal issues surrounding our military presence in Italy.

U.S.-Italian Defense Cooperation: An Enduring Partnership

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¶8. (SBU) Italy buys about USD 500 million in defense articles annually from the U.S., and has invested heavily in Defense Cooperation in Armaments (DCA), including such programs as the Joint Strike Fighter (in which Italy has a USD 1.9 billion commitment), the U.S.-German-Italian MEADS missile defense system, in which Italy holds a 17 per cent stake, and the NATO Allied Ground Surveillance program, which Italy will host at Sigonella and to which it is the third-largest contributor. In addition, Italy is a long-term lessor of F-16s and a purchaser of U.S. defense goods and services such as the KC767 tanker aircraft, CH47F helicopter and training for its jet fighter pilots. Italy was disappointed in the cancellation of the VH71 presidential helicopter program and will likely look to participate in the bidding for the next contract. Italy's defense parastatal Finmeccanica, which sold USD 2.3 billion in defense equipment to the U.S. in 2008, has a strong stake in the solidity of the U.S.-Italy relationship.

U.S. Assertion of Jurisdiction in Romano Case  
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¶9. (C) La Russa is not a key player in judicial matters and, like the rest of the cabinet, has very little influence over the highly independent Italian judiciary.  
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